NBII Metadata Clearinghouse Evolves to Meet User Needs

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In late 1997, the National Biological Information Infrastructure (NBII) initiated an Internet-based Clearinghouse — the NBII Metadata Clearinghouse <http://metadata.nbii.gov/> — to help individuals easily search for, and locate, biological data and information from a variety of sources. Since then, the Clearinghouse has been and remains one of the most important NBII components.

Through this service, NBII users can search an online "card catalog" of detailed descriptions (metadata) of hundreds of different biological data sets and information products from many different sources to find the particular item that meets their needs. These information products are developed and maintained by U.S. Geological Survey scientists as well as other NBII participants, including federal, state, and local government agencies; private organizations; universities; and other partners around the nation and the world.

The metadata concisely convey such things as subject matter; how, when, where, and by whom the data were collected; how to access the database or information products; and person(s) to contact for more information.
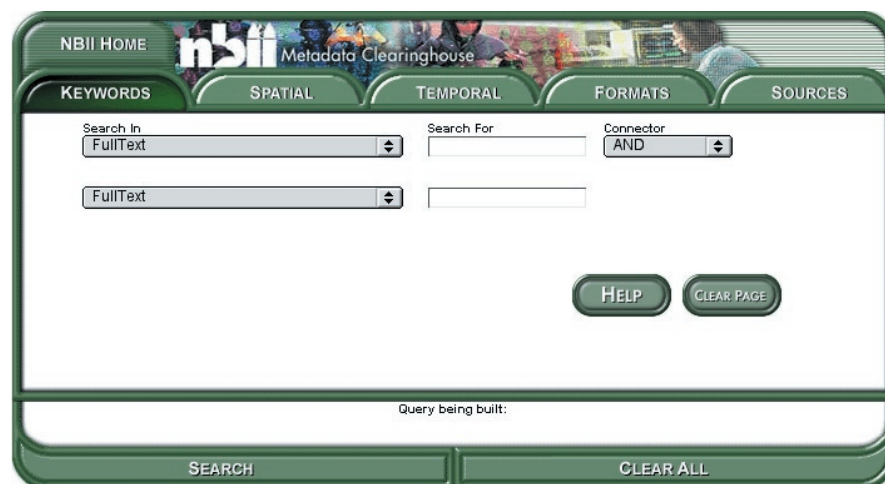
The requirements of some Clearinghouse searchers include data on specific research topics or data from studies in specific geographic locations. Others use this service to compile background information before beginning new studies or to better design new research or inventory studies. Still others use the Clearinghouse to help identify organizations and scientists who have done or are doing work on specific

resource issues as a source of possible future interactions or collaborations.

The metadata descriptions in the NBII Clearinghouse are developed by a host of NBII participants who wish to make their data sets or information products (such as technical reports) more widely available to others for

sharing, exchange, and analysis. Metadata formats in the NBII Clearinghouse follow the NBII biological metadata standard, which also is an approved "profile" or extension of the Federal Geographic Data Committee's geospatial metadata standard.

The NBII Program provides training and technical support in metadata development to assist those agencies, organizations, and individuals who are interested in documenting their data and information for the Clearinghouse.

Since its founding, the NBII Metadata Clearinghouse has been expanding and evolving. Metadata descriptions of new data sets and

information products are continually added and, in addition, several NBII partner organizations have established their own NBII Clearinghouse "nodes" through which they are serving their collections of NBII metadata. Because the NBII Clearinghouse is also fully compliant with (and a registered

node of) the National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) Clearinghouse, users of the NSDI Clearinghouse system can readily search through metadata in the NBII Clearinghouse and vice versa.

One recent Clearinghouse innovation has been the significant redesign of the Clearinghouse interface, making metadata access simpler and easier than ever before. Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL), in Oak Ridge, TN — and a designated World Data Center — handled the interface redesign project, which took about three months to complete. Today, all NBII Metadata Clearinghouse records are sited at ORNL.

To reach the new interface, just go to <http://www.nbii.gov/ datainfo/metadata/clearinghouse/> (the interface is an online search window that gives you access to the Clearinghouse — not the Clearinghouse itself). The interface is sometimes referred to as "tabbed" since, at the top of the screen, you have a variety of "tabs" to choose from – keywords, spatial, temporal, formats, and sources. First you click on one of the tabs, then enter relevant information to search against that category.

One reason the new Clearinghouse interface is easier to use is because everything is on one page. You enter search information through the tabs at the top, then click on "submit" at the bottom of the frame to start your search. You don't have to scroll through text anymore before you start your search.

The new interface automatically searches metadata of all the NBII node partners, rather than requiring users to choose which partners they want to search. Once the search is completed, a "Search Summary" report shows the databases searched, the Clearinghouse status, and the number of records found to match each query by node. If you want to search selected sources (nodes), you can do that as well by clicking on "Sources."

To examine the metadata found in a database, just click on the database name and the records pop up for you to scroll through. You can click on the title to open the metadata record and read the abstract as well as other information the record offers.

While the old interface offered spatial searching, the new interface makes such searching easier than ever. You can use your mouse to select an area, then either enter the coordinates or hit the MAP button. If you choose the latter, a map pops up for you glide your cursor over, drawing a box around the area you want. A mouse click lets you "zoom in" or "zoom out" on the map.

If you need help operating the new NBII Metadata Clearinghouse interface, just click on Help and it is available via a pop-up window.